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By Andrew Hamlin

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Last fall, a new translation of the classic Chinese text, the “I Ching,” or “Book of Changes,” appeared in bookstores. This new version of the centuries-old text for divining one’s future appeared courtesy of a professor who grew up in Seattle and learned about Asian cultures from her early teachers. Her name is Dr.

Margaret Pearson, and she’s currently teaching at Skidmore College in upstate New York.

A native of Seattle’s Wedgewood neighborhood and daughter of a high school teacher, Dr. Pearson attended Bryant Elementary School, Nathan Eckstein Junior High, and Roosevelt High School.

“Some of my best memories,” she recalled in an e-mail interview, “are of walks to and from school, and of the many tall trees I walked by. I remember seeing one of them fall to the ground during a windstorm one day when I was at home sick.”

“In those days, when most families had only one car, many children walked to school alone, and I enjoyed this,” she continued. “I remember beautiful views of the Olympics in one direction and the Cascades in the other.”

Her experiences in Seattle, including her exposure to Seattle-based Shiga’s Imports, shaped the person she grew into.

“Later, I came to enjoy Shiga’s shop, and occasional chats with Mr. Shiga himself.

[I was] active in the peace movement during graduate school, [so] I asked him about his experiences during WWII. He spoke briefly of his conscientious objection to fighting in that war and of his resulting imprisonment for the duration. I am so glad his shop continues many of his traditions.”

Her honors group at Eckstein, led by Ms. Lee Ewalt, encouraged her multicultural leanings.

"I remember giving a book report on the Ramayana. This was my first exposure to Chinese history and culture," she said.

At Roosevelt High School, she studied under Miss Jean Musser, who introduced her to Chinese poetry and philosophy, as well as "The Republic" by Plato.

"I memorized many of Li Bo (Li Po)'s poems, as translated by Shigeyoshi Obata, and much of the Laozi (Lao-tzu), as rendered by Witter Bynner. I later learned from [meeting] Anne Lindbergh that this was the edition she and Charles carried on their travels."

"I also read Paul Reps' 'Zen Flesh, Zen Bones,' a wonderful introduction to some of the core texts of Zen," she continued. "I chose Tuttle as my publisher [for her "I Ching" translation] largely because they have kept this book in print, and had reissued it the year I visited their booth and met my editor at a conference."

She received an undergraduate degree at Smith College in Massachusetts and spent four years in Chinese Studies at the University of Washington. "My main adviser was Jack Dull, who was a wonderful lecturer. I also delighted in the profound knowledge of Hellmut Wilhelm, who taught me Chinese literature, and of Chan Hok-lam, who taught me research methods."

She also studied at Taiwan National University in Taipei from 1973 to 1975.

"At that time, there were fewer Westerners there than there are now. My blue eyes and blonde hair fascinated (and frightened) children, and drew crowds when I visited small villages ... so much was different then [in Taiwan]. Much more oil in the food, few big chunks of meat, and salads and cheese were very rare. All water needed to be boiled, and there was no central heating in my apartment or at school. I learned that if I had at least five people in my living room in the winter, we generated enough heat that we could remove our coats."

Her time abroad helped develop her understanding of gender.

"I am so glad I had the opportunity to be a stranger in a strange land for nearly two years. I learned, for example, that I was asking the wrong questions if I wanted to understand the status of women. I am not sure I ever found the right questions, much less adequate answers, but I did learn to listen to silences in conversations, as well as spoken words, as Taiwan was under martial law then.

When people said 'things are better now,' I knew that sometimes this was an expression of fear."

She took 14 years to complete her first English draft of the "I Ching," working much of the time on sabbatical at Clare Hall, Cambridge University, in England. "

“I have clearly separated the core text (the Zhouyi and the xiang) from its commentaries,” she comments. “This is what readers expect of a translation, but it is relatively rare for this particular text.

“I have also reflected the gender neutral nature of most Chinese pronouns by using a gender neutral English pronoun, instead of ‘he.’ We now know that women, as well as men, used the book, and current English usage no longer sees ‘he’ as the universal it once seemed to be.

“When stripped of later commentaries,” she concludes, “the Zhouyi is remarkably concrete. It lacks abstractions and cosmological terms. It is more vivid, and has far fewer gender stereotypes than most people think.” (end)

For more information on Dr. Pearson’s “I Ching,” consult her website at <http://originaliching.org>.

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